The Seminoe Dam letters

Correspondence of

John N. Speakes

June - September 1938

Wyoming

This collection preserves two original, multi-page typed letters composed in June and September of 1938 by John N. Speakes. Written during the height of the New Deal-era construction of the Seminoe Dam on the North Platte River, these dispatches offer a rare, firsthand glimpse into daily operations, civilian labor, and life within the construction camp where Speakes served as the manager of the site commissary

MORRISON-UTAH-WINSTON-LAWLER
SEMINOE VENTURE

OFFICE AT Seminoe Dam, Wyo. June 24, 1938

Dear Sneider Pie:

Of course I was glad to hear from you even though I didn't indicate it by prompt reply. Tonight I'm more or less stopping work at 8 oclock in order to get a letter or two off. Of course I'll be interrupted for the next hour by store customers but by now I'm used to that.

Quite some time ago I wrote Betty Wood and got a very nice reply practically by return mail. She was then anticipating a trip to North Carolina to a Pi Phi convention. She said how glad she and her family were to have our family back in the neighborhood.

Today I received a letter(very nicely worded and expressed) from Uncle Carl dealing to a great degree with Willmar and the superlative hunting that will be had there in the fall. Among other things he noted that Grandma was apparently in pretty good health. Incidentally I have not written her yet although I intend to shortly. I sent her one of those "Seminoe Dam day in Rawlins" papers, but with no explanation, so she may destroy it without realizing its significance.

Dorothy I have not heard from since immediately after my arrival here. However I don't expect a letter for some time since I just wrote her the other day, the first letter to her since my arrival. I'm curious to know how her affaire d'amour in New York came out.

I received Pop's latest letter today and was interested in hearing about the new warehouse and the strike situation.

By Wednesday's paper, received today, I note that Minneapolis is finally getting a bit of warm weather. Here the climate constantly reminds me of nice fall weather and I like it very much. It is cool mornings and evenings so that I wear a sweater or sweat-shirt much of the time until mid-day. However the coolness is dry, having none of that damp quality so familiar in the lake region of Northern Minnesota.

In answer to your subtle interrogation, I have not been into town since coming here, in fact have not yet taken that much desired stroll of an hour or so through the picturesque surrounding mountains. Before the summer is over, however, I shall find time to do this latter. Town I scarcely expect to see until I leave.----With this exception---I'm planning on going down to Cheyenne July 26th to take in the "Frontier Days". You know that's the most celebrated wild west rodeo in the country, the so-called world's championship affair. During the five

days of the contests Cheyenne is crammed with visitors from all over the country. The town now practically lives the year around just for the rodeo.

I buy a great deal of meat from the Cudahy plant in Denver (in fact I have just signed my check for my last month's meat bill and it's lying on my desk ready to go out in the morning--$2,043.92) and one of the Cudahy men on the rodeo committee is going to fix it up so that I can get down in front where I can take movies of the whole thing,or as much as I desire.I think it an opportunity of a lifetime and only hope that nothing arises to prevent my leaving camp for the required time.

I trust you got the gum sent with my compliments. It'll be a wonder if I don't get huge in girth.In the store I'm surrounded by candies of all kinds and of course I can have anything that I desire which may be in the kitchen stock. The innermost room of the cooler contains all the various meats and cheeses while the outer room,kept at slightly higher temperature,is full of oranges,grapefruit,bananas,apples,lemons, and the like. Always there is an abundance of pastry and various kinds of breads,all of course baked in our own bakery oven.(our regular skedule calls for the night baker to bake 50 pies a night, while the day baker usually bakes the bread,the pastry being split up between them).I'm pretty well immune to the pastry however,except when I can pluck fresh Bismarks and warm raisen raised dough-nuts from the cooling pans.

For now I must close but later I hope to tell you about camp and the people here. To me it all seems so interesting that I feel I could devote several letters to that subject alone.I'm rather ashamed of the quality of my letters thus far.It isn't as though you sat down and composed a carefully thought-out composition, instead one sits down and bats out whatever comes into his head, feeling guilty all the while for the time he is taking off from his job.

Thank George for sending the Reader's Digests and tell him I'll write shortly.

Boron tells me that "Cline" (Bob Clinite) is an expectant father.

Your extremely hard working brother,

John

P.S. What of the trip-with Marna or otherwise,or your other plans for the summer ?

MORRISON-UTAH-WINSTON-LAWLER
SEMINOE VENTURE

OFFICE AT Seminoe Dam,Wyoming. Sept. 21,'38

Dear Sneider:

It was most charitable of you to write again,knowing as you did,that our letter account is still unbalanced.By now I have discovered that I never can quite catch up on my work and so I am beginning to snatch a few moments off now and then for relaxation of a sort,something I had not done until recently. If I worked all day and all night every day there would still remain things to be d one,so now I'm letting down just a wee bit and enjoying some of the things to be seen and done.

Recently I got up early (that is,long before my usual 5:30 rising time) and took the movie camera out in search of antelope on the plains.Luck was against me and I saw but one antelope,a large buck,yet I felt amply repaid for my efforts.The sun rising over the distant hills,the crisp morning air smelling sweet with purple sage,the prairie dogs sitting beside their holes,-all made a picture I shall not soon forget. Of course I was away from camp only a comparatively few minutes and it just happened that no antelope were grazing on the plain that morning,so I didn't secure the movies I had hoped for.The one buck I did see left quite an impression on me. As I rounded a small hill,I chanced to look up to the crest,and there proudly facing into the rising sun,his dappled coat gleaming and his devil-like horns glistening,was a large buck.Not having time to stalk him,I took a few movie shots of him as he receded across the plain.

Our camp is in the midst of the Seminoe mountains which rise rather abruptly from the plain.The North Platte river flows in off the plain and through these mountains (or large hills) in a rocky gorge or ravine at places some 500 feet deep. The dam is being built in this ravine and our camp occupied filled-in ground at the bottom of the canyon immediately adjacent to the river. Immediately above our camp is the government colony of engineers and their families and somewhat above this is the shack town of Seminoe Dam.This is peopled by laborers and their families(the single men usually living in our camp). Though these two colonies are almost directly above us,it is over a mile to them by road,a road now vastly improved from its condition of a year or so ago,but still a winding tortuous path extremely dangerous to the unwary or intoxicated. Only three weeks ago I saw the coroner drive in off the mountain,a body curled up on the back seat of his Buick.The deceased was Marvin Grimes,a young laborer who while intoxicated hurled his car off one of the worst places on the road.

But tragedy by no means pervades all.Countless cars are going off the road with their occupants coming out unscathed. All in all I believe I have never laughed so much as I have this summer.

On my arrival out here I noted one young chap with a hideously scarred and maltreated nose.Shortly I knew the story. It seems that he had taken a shine to a young girl in Rawlins. This fair damsel was also being courted

by a certain restaurant owner,who no doubt,did not mean to do right by Little Nell but who in typical masculine fashion resented the similar intentions that any others might have.One night the lad, Joe,was in town and had the temerity to take the girl out to dinner at the other chap's restaurant. During the meal the owner,a huge Swede, entered,intoxicated,and spied the loving couple.Rushing over to their booth he lunged at Joe and fisticuffs were commencing when onlookers pulled the adversaries apart.But they had notreckoned with the cunning and power of the huge Swede. Though pinioned securely about the shoulders,in a rare inspirational flash aided and abbetted by a well liquored brain,he lunged forward and with flashing teeth gnashed off the luckless Joseph's nose. This proved exceedingly embarassing for the latter,what with his best girl present,yet to those who knew him it seemed a singularly unique retaliation, since his reputation for nosiness and prying was considerable.

The other day I started out shortly after breakfast to climb the mountain which rises immediately above my office.I call it a mountain for want of a better name,it seeming slightly more appropriate than "hill". At the end of two hours I was at the top-most peak from which I could see the entirelay-out of the dam-site,the Government colony,and the shack town.There high among the soughing pines and rocks I lay down to bask in the Indian summer sun.From far below came the sounds of construction, distant yet distinct in the thin air.Across a sunlit glade a doe mule deer with two fawns stole quietly into the open,only to vanish with a bound when I reached for my camera.Far down the river I noticed some of the men trout fishing. As I regretfully started to descend to camp I thogght that it is for such moments that men live.

But those moments of intense satisfaction with life do not only come to one on mountain tops. I recall an evening in July at a ranch 10 miles away. I recall lying lazily on the floor just in from the open doorway;outside the great,vast Wyoming night with its myriad of stars;inside the firelight flashing on a wall covered with Indian arrow heads and relics of the Old West.As I lay and thought,and listened to cow-boy ditties sung and yodeled by a real cow-boy accompanying himself on his guitar, the busy civilized world seemed aeons away.Wars and rumors of wars seemed of another planet.I felt an intense desire to grasp each moment and hold it, to not come back through the looking-glass to reality.

MORRISON-UTAH-WINSTON-LAWLER
SEMINOE VENTURE

OFFICE AT

You have no doubt gathered by now that I love the west and will probably never again feel entirely satisfied with the east. Minnesota will seem stuffy with its crowded landscapes. There's a vastness to the country that effects one decidedly. Some out here hate it, think it barren and harsh; others, like myself like it.

The dam is coming along nicely. If the weather holds out, there are about 30 days more of concreting on the main structure. Of course much other work will remain to be done by specialized crews.(Wiring the power house etc). Then too, all of our camp will have to be torn down and cleaned up this winter. So I don't know when I shall be able to leave. I must confess no pressing desire to leave. I only wish my work would permit me time off to travel about the surrounding country, see scenes of famous Indian fights, walk through South Pass, the famous pass of the Oregon Trail, etc.

In an effort to beat the weather the company is putting on many men and so I am terribly busy. Our camp is full, men are even sleeping in cars, our dining hall is crowded. All that is fine, as it increases the commissary income, but unfortunately my bedding is wearing out and every item is needed. Yesterday I had to order 12 doz sheets, 6 doz pillow cases, pillows and two hundred blankets. Had the job been able to finish just a few months earlier I would not have needed to have gone to this expense. You see in a few months when the job is over I'll have this almost new equipment on hand and it will be of very little value.

Well, I've got to close now. I owe both George and Pop letters and will have to try to get those off in the next day or so.

John